

Strangling the enemy required more than encirclement and movement to contact; it took solid pounding from airpower, too.

The Airpower of



US Army photo by Spc. Andres J. Rodriguez

Anaconda



WHEN American soldiers and their allies came under intense enemy fire in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan, it took airpower to save the day. Operation Anaconda was for US troops the biggest ground battle of the war on terrorism in Afghanistan. Beginning on March 1, 2002, US forces, their Afghan allies, and other coalition forces including Canadians and Australians took a beating in the rugged mountains near Pakistan. After initial contact sparked heavy fighting, airpower was called in to provide close air support and later to herd and pound the enemy.

Ultimately, Operation Anaconda was a success, due in no small part to the contributions of airpower and the bravery and heroism of those on the ground and in the air alike. “They defeated an evil enemy under horrendous conditions,” said one military official after it was all over. Yet Anaconda—boldly named for the snake that crushes its prey—was also an object lesson in using airpower to stifle enemy resistance.

No More Tora Boras

Operation Anaconda was born out of a plan to trap al Qaeda fighters regrouping in the mountains. The quick collapse of strongholds like Kandahar compelled surviving al Qaeda fighters to move back toward

By Rebecca Grant

caves and 10,000-foot mountain peaks on the Pakistani border.

In December, at Tora Bora, al Qaeda fighters escaped bombing of the cave complex and fled into the mountains. Marine Gen. Peter Pace, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said on Dec. 12, "There are multiple routes of ingress and egress, so it is certainly conceivable that groups of two, three, 15, 20 could, walking out of there, in fact, get out." US troops on the ground did not engage directly; according to Pace, their role was to support the Afghan fighters and "to direct the bombing that's taking place in support of the opposition forces." When Afghan forces encountered al Qaeda, surrender negotiations took place. Although the US tried to monitor the border with Pakistan, Pace conceded it was "not a perfect picture." The net result was that many al Qaeda fighters slipped away. The same thing happened when US airpower hit a camp complex at Zhawar Kili in January.

Frustration was building in Central Command, and clustering Taliban and al Qaeda offered a tempting target. Near the town of Shah-e-Kot, in the Arma mountains, a group of al Qaeda reportedly paid villagers to use their homes. Al Qaeda fighters also took up residence in the warren of caves built after the Soviet invasion more than 20 years earlier.

The failure to catch all the dispersed al Qaeda fighters was vexing, and when they began to mass again in



A B-52 from the 2nd Bomb Wing, Barksdale AFB, La., returns from a mission over Afghanistan. B-52s equipped with JDAMs provided close air support—a role for the heavy bomber that many call transformational.

the east, they presented a threat to the shaky peace and Afghanistan's new government. Retired Army Gen. Wesley K. Clark, the former Supreme Allied Commander Europe, in an interview with London's *Daily Telegraph* described it this way: "You can't win a war simply by being there and reacting." He said, "You have to do some information building and then you have to have a strong fighting force ready to follow it up."

In February 2002, Central Command watched closely as the clot of al Qaeda near Shah-e-Kot morphed from a force on the run to a concen-

trated threat. Satellites and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles tracked forces on the move. US teams were inserted to watch them more closely. They "started to get together in a place where they could have enough mass to be effective," said Gen. Richard B. Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "And we've been following that, allowing it to develop until we thought it was the proper time to strike."

Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld described the danger al Qaeda still posed. "Their goal is to reconstitute, to try to throw out the new interim government of Afghanistan, to kill coalition forces, and to try to regain the ability to use Afghanistan as a base for terrorist operations."

"We intend to prevent them from doing that," he added.

There was another objective. As Myers delicately worded it in an interview on CNN, "One of the reasons we want to go in here is not just to eradicate the Taliban and al Qaeda, but also to gain information ... that might have impact on future operations somewhere around the world." Ideally, "we'd like some of them to surrender so we can get our hands on them and interrogate them," said Myers.

Part of the preparation included schooling selected Afghan soldiers in infantry tactics at a base near Khost, east of Gardez. Special forces trained perhaps as many as 1,000 Afghan soldiers in basic infantry techniques designed to improve their staying



A-10s deployed to Bagram air base, near Kabul, Afghanistan, have been flown by both active duty and reserve pilots. A-10s provide close air support for ground troops ferreting out al Qaeda and Taliban fighters in the mountains.

USAF photo by TSgt. Melissa Sanscrainte

USAF photo by MSgt. Greg M. Kobashigawa

power and ability to fit in with a coordinated offensive. The idea was to break the pattern of advance and retreat and teach the Afghan soldiers to take and hold ground. In addition to the Afghans, 200 highly trained special forces from Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, and Norway joined in, while French strike aircraft signed on for coalition air duty.

CENTCOM's plan for eliminating al Qaeda pockets would be a "movement to contact" as Army Gen. Tommy R. Franks, CENTCOM head, later termed it. Instead of a single, traditional front line, the objective was to take key positions and form a screen around several known caves, compounds, and other al Qaeda strongholds. "This is a sizeable pocket of al Qaeda that needs to be dealt with," Central Command spokesman Rear Adm. Craig R. Quigley told the *New York Times*. "We have studied this place for some time."

When al Qaeda fled in front of the Afghan troops, US and coalition forces would be there to catch them. One former 10th Mountain Division commander in an interview with the *Washington Post* said that pushing an enemy into a preplanned blocking force was a classic light infantry tactic. In Afghanistan, it came with a helpful twist. Since airpower was far more precise than in the past, air-ground coordination could be more effective.

In concept, Operation Anaconda was designed to let al Qaeda build up. Then coalition forces would strike and eliminate them. Maj. Gen. Franklin L. Hagenback, who planned and led the operation, originally concluded it would take about 72 hours to complete.

Two things went wrong. First, the US, Afghan, and coalition troops did not know how much resistance they would face because estimates on the number of al Qaeda in the area varied widely. "We've been watching the area for several weeks now," Maj. Ralph Mills, a CENTCOM spokesman, said in a statement at the start of the operation. However, as at Tora Bora, it was difficult to gauge the level of resistance. "This enemy has learned how to conceal themselves from the things that we have at our disposal to look for them," one senior military official familiar with special operations tactics later explained.



USAF photo by SSgt. Aaron D. Allmon II

A crew loads 105 mm rounds into the powerful Howitzer carried by the AC-130 gunships. In Operation Enduring Freedom, the AC-130 has proved valuable for its long loiter time over target.

Three weeks before Operation Anaconda, Myers visited Afghanistan. He was briefed on the plan, but no specifics on the level of resistance were available. "Before we went in there, we heard everywhere from 200 to several thousand [al Qaeda troops]," Myers said on CNN. "We think there were hundreds." Myers told CNN that he concluded after he was briefed by Hagenback: "I don't think there was any doubt in his mind that this was going to be a tough fight."

Not knowing the exact number or location of al Qaeda fighters was not a recipe for disaster by itself. During October and November, estimates of resistance were uncertain, but the close coordination of ground teams with the air component helped identify targets quickly when needed and forestalled ambushes.

Operation Anaconda's second flaw was that the plan was not tightly coordinated with the air component. The emerging plan for Anaconda had all the earmarks of an operation planned almost exclusively within the Army component and special forces. What Myers, in his discussions with Hagenback, could not have known was that the plan for Anaconda had not been fully coordinated with the joint air component. According to one officer, the Combined Air Operations Center staff did not learn of Anaconda until a day before the operation was due to start.

Still, the operation went forward,

after weeks of planning, with Rumsfeld's personal approval.

Anaconda Unfolds

The assault began early on Saturday, March 2, as trucks carried Afghan troops plus US and coalition special forces toward the small town of Sirkankel. The Afghan commander, Gen. Zia Lodin, reportedly had 450 soldiers with him. Heavy fire stalled the convoy, and one American soldier was killed by a mortar shell that hit his truck. US Army AH-64 Apache helicopters joined the fray, taking a number of hits. "There were many bad people shooting very big caliber weapons at them," said Maj. Bryan Hilferty, a 10th Mountain Division spokesman.

South of Sirkankel, a unit of the 101st Airborne Division also met opposition. Its commander, Col. Frank Wiercinski, said: "We survived three mortar barrages during the day and at one point we had nine or 10 al Qaeda coming to do us, but instead, we did them." Nearby in Marzak, elements of the 10th Mountain Division were pinned in another 12-hour battle, with mortar rounds and Rocket-Propelled Grenades taking a toll of 13 Americans wounded. Apache helicopters dove into the fray taking multiple hits from RPGs and small arms.

The encirclement was not going as smoothly. Al Qaeda fighters were dispersed in small groups sized from

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as few as three men to as many as a score. Some sheltered in the cave system while others occupied prepared positions on the mountain ridges. As coalition forces later found, the strong points were well-supplied with weapons brought in over the preceding months. Al Qaeda were indeed herded together—but they were ready for a fight.

Worse, coordination with the Afghans was not working. One US detachment poised near a small al Qaeda compound expected a supporting attack from Lodin, but it called in airpower instead. Al Qaeda “kind of hit us by surprise at first, south of the compound, and moved up,” Army Lt. Charles Thompson told the *Los Angeles Times*. “But aircraft blew up about a platoon-sized element.”

Takur Gar

For US forces, the worst was yet to come. Seven Americans died in fierce fighting during attempted helicopter insertions near a mountaintop called Takur Gar on March 4.

The ridge at Takur Gar commanded a view of the entire valley—15 miles of visibility in the clear weather of Operation Anaconda’s first week. Part of the plan for Operation Anaconda called for US forces to take Objective Ginger, a little below the top of the ridge, giving coalition forces the sweeping strategic view of the valley. But above the ridge, on its shaded side, three feet of new snow masked hardened bunkers where al Qaeda

fighters were ready to put up deadly resistance. The snow canopied on a pine tree, making the cover even more effective. The snow filled in footprints that might have revealed the presence of the enemy force.

First to discover the al Qaeda nest was a Navy SEAL team trying to insert troops under cover of darkness. The SEALs’ MH-47 helicopter was hit through the hydraulic lines and withdrew hastily. Petty Officer 1st Class Neil C. Roberts fell from the back of the helicopter and later died of a bullet wound he suffered while fighting. An AC-130 and then, as daylight neared, a pair of F-15s flew combat air patrol in the area. The special forces did not take helicopter firepower of their own for the mission. “This was a stealthy infil [tration] to an outpost. And you don’t want to put a whole lot of stuff in there to tell the enemy you’re coming,” explained a military official, an Army aviator later commissioned by Franks to report on the battle.

Tactical surprise was gone. The SEALs’ helicopter crash-landed 4.3 miles away, while a second helicopter picked up the team and took them back to save Roberts. Now it was a rescue—not a long mission—and they needed to move fast. To get back to Roberts, the SEALs “dropped much of their equipment to lighten them up” and returned to the ridge taking just their combat gear and additional ammunition, said the senior military official. After reinsertion,

the SEAL team on the ground picked their way forward over two and a half hours to reach Roberts. In the process they called on an AC-130 and two F-15Es for support and one unleashed a 500-pound Laser-Guided Bomb on the ridge.

While one F-15E refueled on an aerial tanker track 20 miles away, two more helicopters were on their way to the scene. A quick reaction unit from Bagram Air Base with combat search and rescue specialists and 10 Army rangers was summoned to aid the SEAL team. The SEALs trying to get to Roberts relayed coordinates to them via another platform—most likely an airborne control element—that filled in the communications gaps created by interrupted line of sight in the mountainous terrain.

As one of the MH-47s prepared to land “about 165 feet from that bunker at the top,” said the military official, a Rocket-Propelled Grenade took off the tail rotor, dropping the Chinook onto the mountain. Another RPG killed the right-side gunner. Four died instantly, and several more were wounded. Surviving aircrew and the Army rangers set up defensive positions 150 feet from one of the snow-concealed bunkers. But the downed helicopter, now a refuge for the wounded, made a fat target. An attack by the rangers on the bunker—uphill, in snow—failed, leaving air as the only immediate recourse.

With the team was a USAF combat controller, SSgt. Gabe Brown. “All I kept thinking was we needed close air support, and we needed it now,” Brown recalled. “My job was to concentrate on bringing in the bombs to knock out the enemy, and I knew I needed to do it fast.”

After getting communications up and speaking with a fellow controller two miles away, Brown contacted the F-15Es. When Brown saw the enemy fire, he realized they were too close to risk using LGBs. “If we couldn’t kill the bunker, we were going to be surrounded,” said Brown.

Even with common visual references, the F-15E’s job was tough. One pilot made a low sweep over the area, popping off rounds at the enemy troops. Brown said, “You could see the snow flying off the ground near the bunker, and I knew he was hitting it.” The F-15E made several more passes, then the pilot indicated he was out of ammunition.

USAF photo



Crippled by rocket fire, an Army Chinook helicopter landed just yards from an enemy bunker, just below the Takur Gar ridgeline. A USAF combat controller called in F-15s to fire on the bunker—a precision bomb collapsed it.

The enemy was still firing. It was two hours into the fight, and Brown said he knew it would only get worse. He called for a bomb drop.

It worked. The bombs were right on target and collapsed the bunker. “The noise was just like it sounds in the movies,” Brown remembered. “You could smell the burning pine off the trees and see the snow kicking off the ground.”

Brown then told the F-15Es the enemy troops were too close and to use only guns again. No F-15E had ever used its gun in combat for close air support. All Brown and the F-15Es could target was a single pine tree, the lone visual reference both could sight. Brown called it the bonsai tree.

Throughout the day USAF aircraft provided close air support as the team on the ground held off al Qaeda for 14 hours before darkness fell and another helicopter extracted them. It was close air support at its best, but the overall cost of the mission was high. The ridge at Takur Gar claimed seven American lives.

Franks praised the individuals who fought. “It is the stuff of which heroes are made,” Franks said of the battle. “We needed to have somebody on that hill,” he said. “That’s the mission that these young people took in stride.”

Al Qaeda’s concealed bunkers and command post changed the equation from a stealthy infiltration to a struggle to survive under fire. How-



USAF photo by S/A. James Harper

F-15Es flying close air support at Takur Gar put munitions on target using a single pine tree for visual reference. Precision bombing took out the al Qaeda bunker, but spared US personnel fighting only yards away.

ever, Franks speculated that, had Roberts not been left behind, the forces would have simply backed off and called in an air strike. As it was, the battle on the ridge took the utmost finesse in close air support.

Stacked Up

For Operation Anaconda as a whole, contact with the enemy demonstrated the need for more airpower, far exceeding the plan for a 72-hour campaign. By Sunday, bombers, fighters, and gunships were stacking up in the area estimated by the Pentagon to be only about 70 square

miles—about the size of the District of Columbia.

The plan to flush out al Qaeda with Afghan troops while the Americans held blocking positions was also crumbling. Coordinating action with the Afghan troops remained a weak link. In the November offensives, timing for the Afghan advances had rarely been precise, making US Army-style coordinated offensives more a dream than a reality. Yet Anaconda was to rely heavily on coordination. Sgt. Maj. Frank Grippe of the 10th Mountain Division told the *New York Times* that his mission was to set up a blocking position to kill or capture al Qaeda driven out by advancing Afghan troops. But the new training in infantry tactics the Afghans had received was not watertight. On March 3, after initial resistance, Lodin pulled back his 450 men to regroup and did not rejoin the fight until Wednesday, March 6. One senior officer told the *New York Times*, “This plan changed 180 degrees.”

The new heading relied far more on US forces and on airpower to help draw out al Qaeda. A senior defense official told the *Washington Post*, “The original plan was supposed to be Afghan led and US supported. After the early difficulties, it ended up becoming US led and Afghan supported.” The other change was fighting al Qaeda in place, instead of blocking and trapping them fleeing, as expected from their behavior at Tora Bora. “We ended up having to



USAF photo by MSgt. Dave Nolan

An F-15E from the 366th Air Expeditionary Wing, loaded with 500-pound laser-guided bombs, prepares for a mission over Afghanistan. US aircraft had dropped more than 2,500 bombs in the Takur Gar area by March 12, 2002.



Northern Alliance members inspect the remnants of bunkers in the mountains near the Shah-e-Kot Valley. Such Taliban and al Qaeda redoubts were pounded hard from the air.

fight the war in the area where the enemy was, rather than get them to run into choke points,” the senior official added.

Revised tactics called for employing ground forces plus Predator UAVs and satellites to locate the enemy. With US ground forces pinning al Qaeda, precise air strikes delivered heavy blows. Those not killed by the bombing could be picked off as they emerged from caves and hideouts. Not only did the initial cluster of al Qaeda come under attack, but the battle drew in more al Qaeda fighters. “We caught several hundred of them heading with RPGs and mortars toward the fight,” Hagenback told reporters on March 5. “We body-slammed them.”

A-10s from Pope AFB, N.C., moved forward on March 10, flying combat sorties within 15 hours after receiving mission notification. Two A-10 pilots, Lt. Col. Edward Kostelnik and Capt. Scott Campbell, were credited with killing more than 200 al Qaeda and Taliban in a single mission, according to Lt. Col. Arden Dahl. “After that night, all al Qaeda and Taliban and their buddies were on the run,” Dahl said. “They just got swacked.”

Those in action praised the air support they got. Army Lt. Chris Beal said after seven days in battle: “We were hailed on, snowed on, shot at, and mortared at, but we did the right thing at the right time. After a lot of close air support came

in, anything that moved was killed by our birds [helicopters] or snipers.” Testimony to the impact of airpower painted a vivid picture of the real tactics of Operation Anaconda. Marine Capt. Brunson Howard, an AH-1 Cobra pilot, described seeing one al Qaeda fighter come out of a foxhole with an RPG, only to face three helicopter gunships. “He never got the chance to put it on his shoulder,” Howard said.

Strategic Success

Strategically, the plan worked. American fighters and bombers dropped more than 2,500 bombs in the area by March 12. As more al Qaeda positions were located and destroyed, the operation began in its second week to focus on smaller and smaller pockets. By mid-March, news reports cited about 500 al Qaeda as dead.

The secondary objective, finding out more about al Qaeda operations, was also met. US forces found a mail-bomb factory and a hoard of technical manuals on microelectronics and digital technology in one house abandoned by al Qaeda during the fighting. “I was awestruck by the minute

detail and ingenuity” of the materials, Army Staff Sgt. Robert Bond, one of the combat engineers at the house, told *USA Today*.

Franks claimed afterward on ABC’s “This Week” that he was not surprised by the intensity of the battle. “I think anytime you have a whole bunch of people in uniform moving into an enemy area in order to attack objectives, there will certainly be places within this area where we’ll encounter very, very substantial resistance.” As Franks explained it, troops had to be inserted to gauge the strength of al Qaeda. Franks said, “We will almost never have perfect intelligence information, and so what we do is we take the information that we have and we move in to confirm or deny the presence of the enemy forces that we suspect.” Franks admitted he “would not downplay the possibility” that his forces “got into a heck of a firefight at some point that they did not anticipate.”

Clark, the former SACEUR, evinced the same tactical proclivities when he said in the *Daily Telegraph* interview about Anaconda, “The thing we must have is intelligence domination on the battlefield, and that means human intelligence and that means boots on the ground.”

Strangling al Qaeda strongholds took more than ground encirclement and movement to contact—it took a solid pounding from airpower, too. One clear lesson was that air-ground coordination—a stunning success in the earlier phases of Operation Enduring Freedom—was given short shrift in the original planning for Operation Anaconda. The 72-hour operation stretched over more than two weeks, demanded intense air support, and might well have had seen higher casualties had the joint air support—from B-52s to F/A-18s to Apaches—not been there when needed.

“This will not be the last such operation in Afghanistan,” Rumsfeld said March 4. But it may be the last one fought without proper planning that includes the joint air component from the start. ■

Rebecca Grant is a contributing editor of Air Force Magazine. She is president of IRIS Independent Research, Inc., in Washington, D.C., and has worked for RAND, the Secretary of the Air Force, and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force. Grant is a fellow of the Eaker Institute for Aerospace Concepts, the public policy and research arm of the Air Force Association’s Aerospace Education Foundation. Her most recent article, “Osirak and Beyond,” appeared in the August 2002 issue.